

BURIED PAST--RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Bernadette Charles and I met with Réjean Benoit on January 30. I was struck by his intelligence and his willingness to dialogue in English, although he is probably an "indépendentiste". He told us that he had been one of the group of St. Armand residents who had got a plaque installed in the town square in honour of the patriots of 1837. A skirmish connected to that rebellion apparently took place in the area.

He had obviously done some reading about the history of slavery, and seemed to understand Avery's desire to designate Nigger Rock a historic site, but he made it clear that it would be very difficult to win his three brothers around. In the meantime, he would support the idea of installing a memorial to St. Armand slaves in the town square, similar to the one in honour of the patriots of 1837.

He also agreed to be in the film. So he will appear in the film as the "front man" for the Benoit brothers, the guy that Avery will have to deal with at every stage of the game. Avery is going to have some tough decisions to make. If the Benoit brothers prove implacable in their opposition to designating Nigger Rock a historic site, would Avery be willing to negotiate a deal which would get a plaque installed at Nigger Rock in exchange for the closure of the area to public access? And if they refused even that, does he apply the pressure by bringing in the media again, or does he accept Réjean's alternative of a monument in the town square? And if it's the latter, does he agree to keeping it a local issue by having it financed locally, or does he follow the example of Birchtown, Nova Scotia, and get St. Armand designated by the provincial and federal governments as a historic site?

As a way of starting off the dialogue, Benoit made the remarkable suggestion that Bernadette give a public reading of her poetry about slavery in the St. Armand library during Black History Month, and he offered to speak to Norman Paquin, the librarian, about it. He did that the next day. Paquin agreed to the idea, and the event is now scheduled for Saturday night, February 26.

The filming should start with that event. Hank Avery will be providing musical support with his guitar. Réjean Benoit will be there, along with Brent Chamberlin (the anglophone mayor), Norman Paquin (the francophone librarian), and Dorothy Williams (the historian). The highlight of the evening will be Bernadette's reading of "Ole bones dey done speak", the poem she wrote inspired by Nigger Rock. It could become a major element in the film's narrative track.

**Martin Duckworth
7 February, 2000**